

Assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on refugees, asylum-seekers and stateless persons in the Republic of Moldova

General overview

On 17 March, the Parliament declared a state of emergency in Moldova due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The restrictions put in place to control the spread of the virus had a serious impact on many people's socio-economic situation, including that of refugees, asylum-seekers and stateless persons.¹

UNHCR responded by addressing needs of the persons of its concern that arose in connection with the pandemic. As a first step, UNHCR widely distributed WHO information leaflets on COVID-19 in various languages and through its partners conducted online and telephone counselling on social, legal and employment issues. In April alone, UNHCR held more than 600 counselling sessions with asylum-seekers, refugees, stateless persons and applicants for stateless status to inform them about the COVID-19 situation and to respond to their questions. Further, UNHCR distributed food and hygiene packages to asylum-seekers residing in the Temporary Accommodation Centre (TAC) and provided one-off cash assistance to 199 asylum-seekers and refugees who had lost their jobs due to the pandemic.

Following these initial measures, UNHCR conducted an assessment of the impact of the pandemic on persons of concern. This report includes a summary of the key findings which will guide UNHCR's further action to ensure an appropriate protection response.

The assessment focused on asylum-seekers accommodated in the Temporary Accommodation Centre (TAC) and in private accommodation, as well as refugees and stateless persons residing in different regions of the country. The stateless group includes persons with official stateless status as well as applicants and those at risk of statelessness. The respondents were selected randomly from the UNHCR database, bearing in mind the approximate proportion of the three groups in the overall registered population in the country and the gender breakdown within the groups.

The assessment was conducted from 1 to 15 July by telephone by UNHCR and its partners. It involved in total, 99 individuals representing 99 households, 15 of the respondents were asylum-seekers, 66 refugees and 18 stateless persons of whom 37 were women and 62 men. Altogether, the 99 households comprised 296 individuals: 26 asylum-seekers, 114 refugees, 21 stateless persons, 132 Moldovan citizens and 3 other foreigners. 30 households consisted of single individuals.

Among the respondents, 40% stated that they had at least one specific need or vulnerability, including 12 persons with disabilities, 13 with medical conditions and 9 elderly persons (60+). In addition, 41 household members had specific needs, including medical conditions, disabilities and elderly family members. Out of 18 stateless persons, 11 reported a disability and 5 are elderly. Out of 66 refugee respondents, 24 reported specific needs, most of which were either related to medical conditions or an elderly age. Out of 15 asylum-seeking respondents, 4 reported a medical condition.

¹ In this report, refugees, asylum-seekers and stateless persons are also referred to as persons of concern to UNHCR.

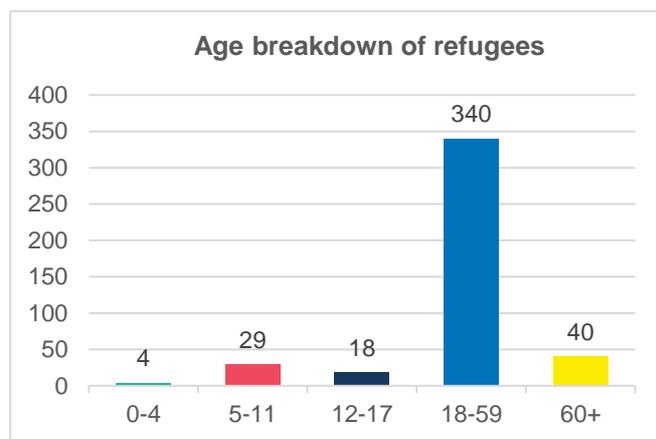
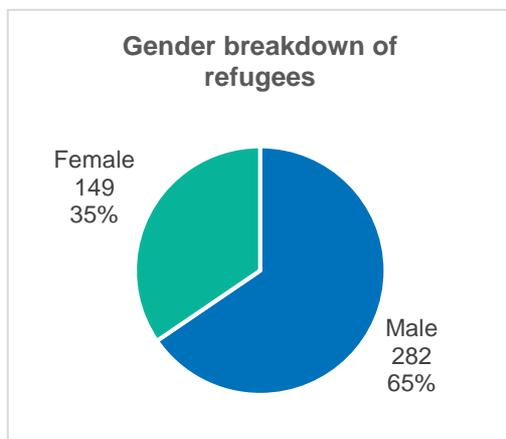
Population figures

Asylum-seekers

- In the first half of 2020, 43 new asylum-seekers were registered with the Bureau for Migration and Asylum in Moldova. Their main countries of origin were Turkey, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.
- As at 30 June, 24 out of 80 asylum-seekers resided in the TAC (reception center).
- 77.5% (62) of all asylum-seekers were male and 22.5% (18) female. The majority of them were 18-59 years old.

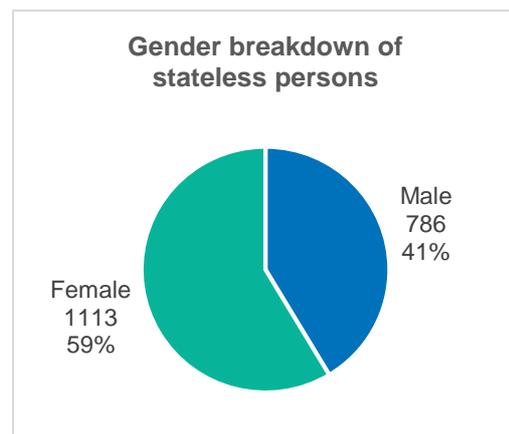
Refugees

- As at 1 July 2020, Moldova hosted 431 refugees. The main countries of origin were Turkey, Bangladesh, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the Syrian Arab Republic.



Stateless persons and applicants for stateless status

- As at 1 June 2020, Moldova hosted 1,899 stateless persons, 285 applicants for stateless status and 1,601 persons with undetermined citizenship.
- 44% of all stateless persons were of Russian origin, 29% Ukrainian, 15% Moldovan, and 12% others.
- 73% of all stateless persons resided in the Transnistrian Region.



Main findings

In total, 15 asylum-seekers were interviewed, of whom 8 were living in private accommodation and 7 in the TAC. The number of stateless persons interviewed was 18. The majority (12 out of 18) of the stateless persons interviewed were living in a government accommodation centre.



Access to information

97% of the respondents reported to have access to COVID-19 related information from the staff of the TAC, UNHCR partners, from the internet, social media and TV. The source of information most cited, both among refugees and asylum-seekers was social media and TV, while almost all stateless persons responded that they obtained information about COVID-19 through the local community.

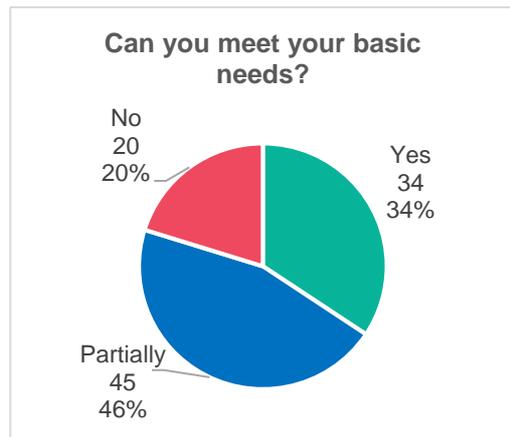


Basic needs

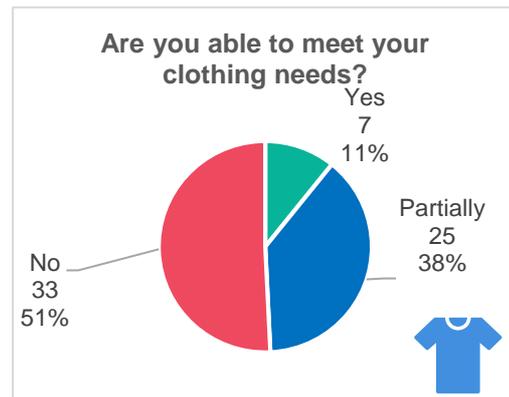
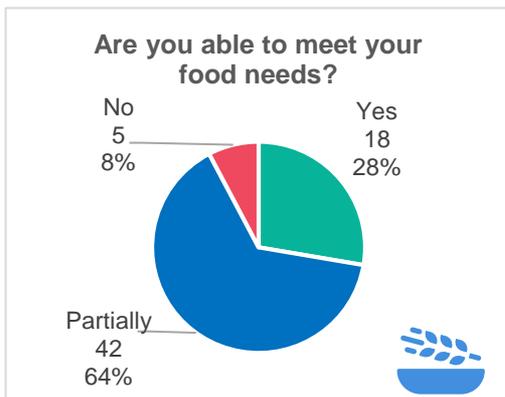
The respondents were asked if they could cover the costs of their basic needs, namely food, health care, rent and utilities, hygiene materials, and clothing.

Further questions on specific basic needs were only asked if the respondent said that in general, they could not or could only partially meet their basic needs.

The majority (65 individuals – 66%) stated that they had difficulties to satisfy basic needs and required financial support for food (60 persons); health care (49 persons); rent and utilities (58 persons); hygiene materials (48 persons); and clothing (58 persons).



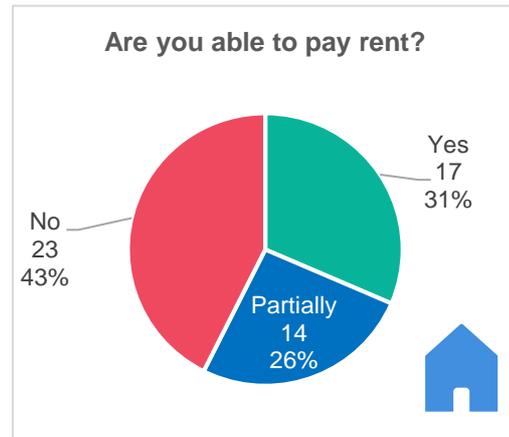
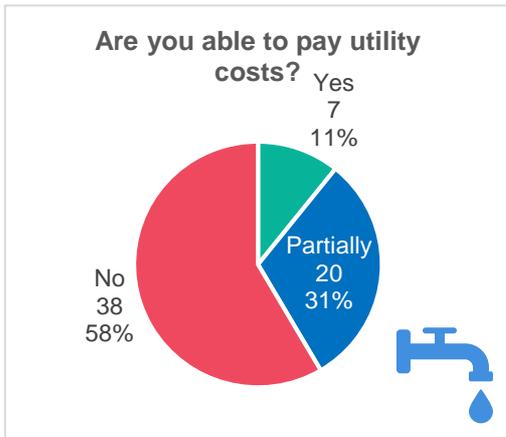
During the lockdown between 17 March and 15 May, all asylum-seekers residing in the TAC continued to receive food packages from Chisinau Municipality, i.e. five lunches per week. In addition, UNHCR delivered to them food and non-food items since many lost their source of income as a result of the lockdown.



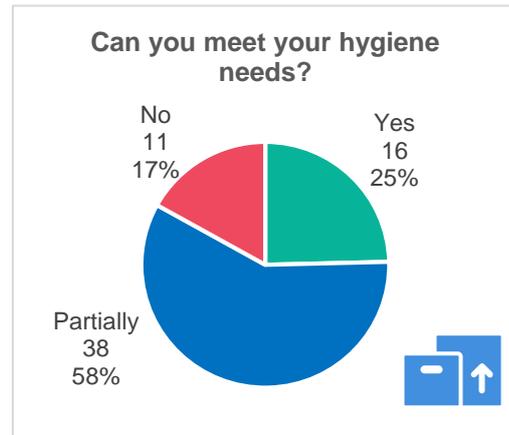
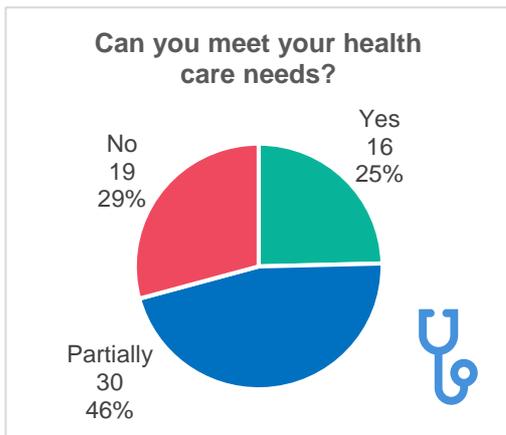
46 individuals (81%) living in private accommodation reported difficulties in meeting their food needs. Only 11% of all the respondents reported being able to meet their clothing needs.

The respondents living in private accommodation (51 persons - 71%) were not or were only partially able to pay for utilities. They also highlighted the utilities as the most difficult need to meet. In addition, out of 54 respondents renting an apartment, 37 were not able or only partially able to pay rent. Those living in government accommodation were not affected as they do not pay rent or related costs.

Only one in four respondents mentioned that they could afford the costs of health care and hygiene products.



In total 52 out of 66 refugee respondents, 8 out of 15 asylum-seeker respondents, and 4 out of 18 stateless respondents were either only partially able or not able to meet their basic needs. For example, 87,5% of refugees who reported a specific need/vulnerability were either partially or not able to meet their basic needs during the pandemic, while among refugees not reporting a specific need/vulnerability this was the case for 48,5% of them. This shows that refugees who reported a specific need/vulnerability faced a significantly higher risk of not meeting their basic needs during the pandemic.



Access to Health Care Services

While refugees and stateless persons enjoy the same rights to health care as Moldovan citizens, asylum-seekers are entitled to primary and pre-hospital emergency health care only. Exceptions to this rule are children and asylum-seekers who are legally employed or enrolled in an educational institution as they have health insurance through their employer or educational institution.

Most respondents (59%) declared that they accessed health care services through the State health insurance system; 79% of their family members also had health insurance. In total, 139 family members of the respondents had State health insurance.

While the State health insurance offers some free of charge services and medicines, those respondents who are holders of health insurance mentioned that many health services or medicines are not covered

by the insurance and are expensive. Therefore, having access to the State health insurance does not automatically mean they do not have out-of-pocket expenses for health care.

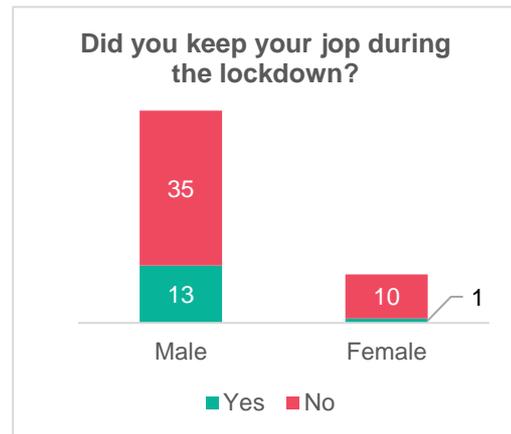
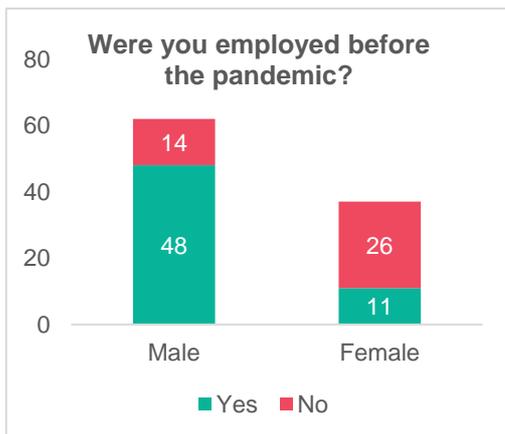
Out of the 41% of respondents without health insurance, 28% stated that they paid for medical costs out of their own pocket while 13% stated that they could afford the costs of medicine and health services.

60% of asylum-seeking respondents are paying out of their own pocket to cover for the health care services, 27% have health insurance and 13% reported that they cannot afford to pay for health care.



Employment

59 respondents had a job before the pandemic but only 24% of them were able to keep their jobs during the lockdown (17 March-15 May). Almost every third responding woman was employed before the pandemic but only one managed to keep her job. Out of 77% of men who were employed before the pandemic only 27% were able to keep their jobs. Out of the respondents who lost their jobs the majority were refugees.



Interviewed women declared that one of the main reasons for losing their jobs was the need to take care of their children who could no longer attend school as of March.

51% of all refugee respondents lost their jobs or could not continue working during the pandemic, while for the vulnerable refugee respondents the number stands at 62,5%.

Only 4 of those who lost their job as a result of the imposed restrictions in the country stated that they applied for unemployment benefits from the Government and only one of them obtained an unemployment allowance.

51 family members of the respondents were working before the pandemic and 51% of them kept their jobs.



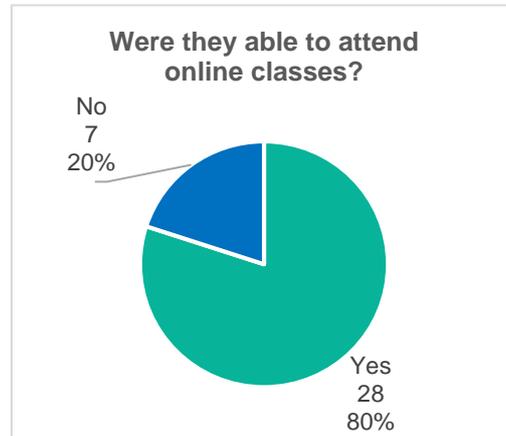
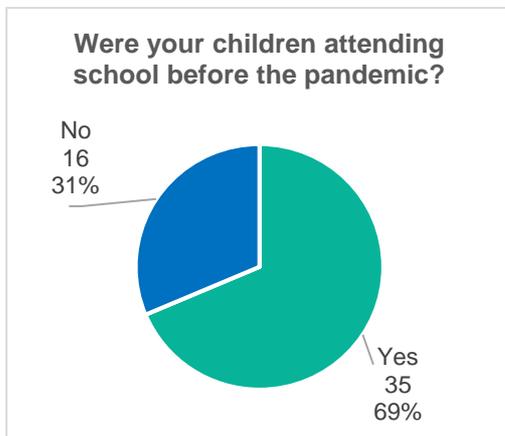
Access to social assistance

Even though refugees and stateless persons have the same rights to social assistance as Moldovan citizens, only 2 respondents received social assistance related to COVID-19 situation from the Government. Asylum-seekers do not have access to State social assistance.



Access to Education

During the pandemic all Moldovan schools were closed, and classes were conducted online for all school-age children. 35 respondents mentioned having school-age children who attended school before the pandemic. 7 of them declared that their children were not able to study online due to lack of proper equipment, internet connection, digital knowledge and support from parents. This shows that 19% of the children of concern to UNHCR covered by this assessment were not able to attend classes during the pandemic.



During the assessment, uncertainty regarding the resumption of schools and kindergartens was among the respondents' most important concern.

UNHCR

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